

Meeting with Diaconia

*Comments on Fr. Carron's Letter to the Fraternity
Fr. Jose Medina, March 21, 2020*

While traveling back from Puerto Rico two weeks ago, I was reflecting on what to do moving forward. Cancellations were cascading and slowly but surely I was beginning to realize that my feeble attempts to recuperate some semblance of 'normalcy' were slowly evaporating. At the same time, preoccupations were arising, preoccupied for loved ones in danger, and for the health and financial stability of many.

Then, I read Julian's letter where he writes that the road to fulfillment passes through engaging fully with the reality before me and that "*The only condition for being truly and faithfully religious [...] is to live always the real intensely.*"¹

The letter spurred me to look at the current situation not as something to be managed but as a privileged opportunity to grow in faith, and to the circumstance that appended every plan I had and had dispossessed me of the things I hold dear as a blessing in disguise.

I want to share some of my discoveries with you (and would love to hear your thoughts about it too).

First, this health emergency is screaming that I'm not in control. Today, I cannot go where I want, I'm told to change my work routine without no end in sight. A few days ago it dawned on me that my health, and the health of those I love, can be at risk at any moment. Suddenly, I realized that my health, my life is not in my hands.

¹ Giussani, Religious Sense, 108

Second, This health emergency is asking me for a radical poverty, or better a radical essentiality in living. Three weeks ago I was thinking about what to give up for Lent. Today, I have to give up activities that I would never dream of giving up before such as seeing friends, or celebrating the eucharist with others.

Third, After the initial overload of calls, messages, and notification of breaking news, I decided to limit the amount of time allotted to the screen and began to embrace the challenge of radical poverty, of essentiality, that is of solitude.

Solitude is quite different from isolation. Solitude is the answer to isolation (Fr. Carron's remarks published in the February Traces are extremely helpful to understand that the answer to isolation is solitude).

In solitude, I have discovered a depth in the daily activities (cooking, praying, working, walking) that escaped me before. Today, I see more. I experience more. The instant has a density that before escaped me, and the words in the psalms I recite every day have befriended me. Accepting solitude has been a hidden grace.

Fourth, within the confinement and the imposition that I'm given, I have a great desire to be liberated, to be free. And because of it, I seek the Lord's favor, I seek to be preferred by Him. I pray so that the Lord liberates us of this pandemic. I pray so that the Lord liberates me, frees me in this moment, overflowing this moment -as it is - of meaning. I pray so that the Lord liberates me from anxiety, from fear, from so many things. I seek God's favor.

Fifth, grounded in the certainty that comes from all that I have seen and lived, I embrace this condition as a privilege. In my dispossession I am facilitated to identify what I need in order to live this instant, this moment. In my solitude I see God's work of liberation. In my experience, I witness the charism's capacity to respond to this extreme event. In this moment in which reason is challenged, I am facilitated to recognize His exceptional presence. How true it is that faith "*flourishes on the extreme boundary of the rational dynamic as a flower of grace to which man adheres with his freedom.*"²

In conclusion, because of all of this, I dare to encourage you to embrace this circumstance and everything that it brings along with. I encourage you to accept the invitation to live essentially, to embrace this radical poverty, to enter into that space of solitude, and to seek liberation, freedom from the One who can give it.

² Giussani, Generating Traces, 24

In this moment – which the Mystery does not spare us – we can grasp the grace of the charism that has taken hold of us, we can grow more attached to the One who calls us through reality in a mysterious way. I invite you to embrace this moment in the context of *vocation* – in the words of Carron – “*tending toward the Mystery in the circumstances through which the Lord has us pass through, by responding to them.*”³ Only this way, we will see the Father’s preference for each one of us. For only He knows what I need (the hairs of your head are counted). He takes care of me. I want to see His work on my experience.

1. The condition for freedom

Allow me to spend a word on what God’s favor looks like.

All through the history of the people of Israel, we can see that the action of God is liberation. God led the people out of Egypt. He made them pass through the sea and drown their enemies. He fed them and provided them with water in the desert. His goal was not to take them from one form of slavery to another (from the Pharaoh to Yaweh) – as Carron said in the Fraternity Exercises two years ago – but to lead them to freedom which is the participation in the very freedom of God.⁴

Liberation has only one condition: I must accept. I must welcome Him. My ‘yes’ is necessary. My liberation cannot happen without me. In order to free me, God needs my freedom.⁵

Liberation is achieved in obedience, in following, and this is dizzying, unsettling. It was unsettling for the people of Israel. For us, it is almost unacceptable since we identify freedom with autonomy, with doing what we please. Yet, in God’s method, obedience is an education to freedom.⁶

To be free, we must belong, we must follow the cloud, “*and when the cloud stops, the people must make camp; when it moves again the people must strike their tents and proceed, always following God.*”⁷ Docility and understanding the ways of God who makes the choice are the first attributes that are demanded of Israel. To entrust ourselves is a necessary step in the journey to arrive at *affective certainty*.⁸

1.1. A Dizzying Condition

³ Giussani, *Realtà è Giovinezza: La Sfida*, on Carron’s letter to the Fraternity

⁴ Balthasar, “Significato dell’antica Alleanza,” in *L’impegno del Cristiano*, 38. On 2018 Fraternity Exercises, 22

⁵ Carron, 2018 Fraternity Exercises, 21

⁶ Carron, 2018 Fraternity Exercises, 22

⁷ Balthasar, 2018 Fraternity Exercises, 22

⁸ Carron, Letter to the Fraternity, 2

That *obedience is an education to freedom* is a dramatic challenge. It runs counter current to today's common mindset. The current situation challenges our common mindset and puts forth a striking choice: either I entrust myself, I say 'yes', or I try to go at it alone.

To entrust oneself, to say 'yes', to live suspended from God, is dizzying. Carron says: "*being suspended "in every moment upon these signs, apparently so fickle, so haphazard, [which are our] circumstances is dizzying.*

*Yet, this is the only reasonable position."*⁹

The Mystery calls us to Him through the circumstances. But we easily grow impatient and urge to gain control. Yet, the very moment we take control forgetting that liberation cannot be conquered but only received instant by instant, we begin to live badly.

Like us, the people of Israel continually yield to the temptation of going at it alone. Instead of following God who works in the present, following His indications, they decide to do it on their own. And every time that they attempted a path to freedom by themselves led to slavery.

I want to read a letter from the 2018 Fraternity Exercises:

"There was a moment when I thought that following Christ was no longer useful and I went away, thinking that nothing would change. But then I began to live badly, and everything was insufficient. I was aware of all that malaise and sadness, but feared admitting it. I feared admitting that deep down, I only need to feel Him present in my life.

Our freedom is inseparable from being continually liberated, from being continually saved, now. The letter continues:

*I need Him in order to accept the circumstances that just have to be embraced. I am not talking about a resigned acceptance of reality, but of a new way of facing new circumstances. So I yielded. I returned and I have begun living anew. If this companionship and Christ present are missing, it is impossible to live."*¹⁰

This is the dramatic challenge we face, as Carron put it:

"In the coming weeks, each of us can see which attitude prevails: the willingness to adhere to the signs of the Mystery, to follow the provocations of reality, or letting ourselves be tossed about by any and every "solution," proposal or explanation that can distract us from that provocation and avoid the resulting dizzying position.

⁹ Carron, Letter to the Fraternity, 1

¹⁰ Letter on 2018 Fraternity Exercises, 22

Each of us, then, can verify the true solidity of the “solutions” in which we seek shelter.”¹¹

1.2. A Hidden Blessing

Looking back, I clearly see how my life is filled with forgetfulness, automaticity, filled with formalism. At the same time, I already see the benefit of accepting the challenge of solitude: life is more dense, more life.

What a hidden blessing! As He did with the people of Israel, these days God undertakes a new initiative with us to defeat the formalism with which we relate to Him. In Jeremiah we see the Lord act upon His people because they “*honor Me with their lips alone, though their hearts are far from Me, and fear of Me has become a mere precept of human teaching*” (Jer 31:33)

The circumstance before us is an invitation to overcome formalism, to bridge the distance at which our hearts keep Him.

In response to our rebellion, to our forgetfulness, the Lord makes himself available so that we may, once again, grasp that He is the Lord and because He is the Lord there is nothing to fear, for He will protect us (Cfr. Is 41,13).

Yet, reading these words, knowing that the Lord watches over us is not enough to stop fearing. Suffice to say that just because someone tells you: “Do not fear!” doesn’t result in a lack of fear. I don’t doubt it to be true. But today, I need it to be *my* truth, the truth in me. I need it to be ‘*affective certainty*’. I need His presence to enter into the core of my being, to show itself as credible in my personal history, in my experience.

In this sense this moment is a privilege opportunity. This moment – which the Mystery does not spare us – is for you and I to know that He is the Lord and to gain the ‘*affective certainty*’ that you can trust in Him.¹² This pandemic gives us, on a silver platter, the chance to grow in self-awareness, to know him, that is to experience freedom, liberation.

This is God’s method and there is nothing more urgent than this.

Therefore, Today and tomorrow’s task is to embarque on this adventure, to say ‘yes’, to recognize and adhere to Him. Blessed are those who trust in Him, those who say ‘yes’, for they will experience the Lord’s favor, they will know that He is. They will be free.

¹¹ Carron, Letter to the Fraternity

¹² Carron, 2018 Fraternity Exercises, 24

2. Companionship

Christ does not leave us alone. You and I might feel that He is not here. But it is not so. God has undertaken an audacious initiative: He has become involved with you and I through a human reality that attracts and challenges us: a particular history, His companionship.

We often reduce Christ's companionship to a formalistic belonging: one of the most dearest activities but not the source of our liberation. This historical moment is a great opportunity to take a step in maturity, to set aside a formalistic belonging to His companionship.

Therefore, before any legitimate attempt to accompany one another in isolation is set into motion, I invite you to ponder about what type of companionship you need to be liberated. On this matter, Carron gave us some guidance worth considering:

First, Carron points at Jesus's contribution to the disciples in time of need: Jesus did not spare them from the questions that reality makes emerge. Instead, He solicited them starting from their own experience so that they could recognize who it was they had encountered.¹³ Therefore, to be '*friends*' is to help one another live *the real intensely* asking questions, and helping to use reason well.¹⁴ As it was for the disciples, Jesus has revealed Himself to us through many signs '*shifting*' our life. We must complete the journey and recognize Him as the origin of that shift so that He may become the '*paradigm*' of our daily life.¹⁵

The problem is not that Christ is not present, but that we don't realize it. We lack His memory.

Second, the current situation provides the opportunity to discover who I recognize as '*friend*', who truly helps me to stay and live the real intensely, who sustains me to say '*yes*', who helps me to recognize Christ's presence in my experience and sustains my adherence to Him.

I encourage you to pray with your '*friends*' **daily**, and share with them, at least **once a week**, what you see taking place in your life.

Third, '*friends*' come to our aid in unexpected ways, even from far away. The two examples Carron mentions are: witnesses and the personal work of the **School of Community**.¹⁶

¹³ Carron, Letter to Fraternity, 3

¹⁴ Carron, letter to the Fraternity, 2

¹⁵ Reference to Carron's reflection at the North America National Diaconia in February 2020. Transcript forthcoming.

¹⁶ Carron, Letter to the Fraternity, 3

I encourage you to read closely the many witnesses published in the CL website and Traces, and urge you to share your experience with others by sending your contribution via email to Lisa Lickona.¹⁷

In this particular moment in which we are called to radical poverty and essentiality is absolutely critical to help one another to break away from formalism. For this reason, many of us have briefly paused gathering for School of Community to become more aware of what the School of Community is and the role that it plays in your life.

Since physically gathering together will not be possible for a long while, I urge you to emphasize the *personal daily* work of the School of Community. Without it, any gathering will result in an overly emotional share, which will impede us from truly being ‘*friends*’ to one another.

I leave to each of the School of Community leaders the responsibility to discern how often you should meet (virtually) and how to use the time. I encourage the local responsables to meet virtually with the School of Community leaders weekly.

Finally, I urge you to pay attention and to respond to the needs that emerge amongst us, stay in contact as much as you can with those who are isolated by making the best use of technology.

3. Home

Many of us will be confined at home in the next few weeks. If we are willing to embrace the challenge, if we are willing to say ‘*yes*’ to what is literally asked of us, we will experience freedom in isolation.

If the problem is not that Christ is not present, but that we don’t realize it, that we lack His memory, we must do everything possible to foster that Memory in our home. Therefore, I encourage you to ponder how you make use of your time at home. Allow me to make some remarks:

First, If obedience is an education to freedom, the main way in which we can help and sustain one another is by following a rule. The **rule** is a daily schedule that is supported by moments of prayer – like telephone wires supported by utility poles every few hundred yards. The rule provides everyone with an opportunity to obey as an education to freedom.

Following Carron’s reminder, I encourage you to decide together a common rhythm of the day supported by the Angelus (3 times a day before meals), the rosary after dinner, and the memorare before going to

¹⁷ Lisa Lickona is reachable at lmlickona@humanadventurecorp.org

sleep. The personal work of the School of Community is today more critical than ever. Find time to do it faithfully every day alone or with others.

To those who have to go out to work long hours, I encourage you to identify those 'utility poles' in your busy day. To those living alone or without small children, I encourage you to add the book of hours also (Morning and Evening Prayer) for the benefit of all.

Second, we belong to one another because we belong to Christ, and if you accept to live in communion, you will experience an unforeseen joy. I encourage you to eat all meals together and to pay particular attention to dinner as a privileged place to talk about the day and judge it with the whole family and to take care of the house together.

This is not an easy proposition. We are so accustomed to affirming our autonomy that at first glance we often find the presence of the other as a burden, an imposition. This is without a doubt the toughest challenge we will face on these days: to say 'yes' to living as one body.

Third, the easiest way to escape from the circumstances we face - confined in a house - is to dive on screens for hours, seeking comfort in group chats, messages, instagram posts, and endless breaking news articles. I encourage you to limit the interaction with the virtual world and embrace the challenge of being present and in communion with those who inhabit your home. I encourage you to avoid the use of screens while being together during dinner or after dinner, and during the time reserved for resting (avoid as much as possible having your phone in your bedroom).

If you experiment and observe the impact that screens have on you, you will quickly understand what is helpful and what is not. Children will obviously need a starting proposal. They will certainly be facilitated if what you ask of them is what you are doing.

Fourth, The mandated isolation requires adults and children to work from home. This will be a challenge for school-age children so accustomed to have every hour of the day managed by adults. As a matter of fact, it will be the main way in which they will experience the disruption that this situation generates.

Children are also called to the same dynamic as adults are. Don't try to fill their schedule with activities. Encourage them to find creative ways on their own and support them in their discoveries. Give them guidance on how to use their time and then let them fence for themselves. Let them experience boredom and discomfort. Their fall back position will be that

of escaping to the virtual world. Limiting how long they use screens will help them embrace the challenge of the now. There will be crying and screaming in the process - necessary steps in the journey. Remember, they are also invited to *live the real intensely* as adults are. This situation is also for them an opportunity to grow in self-awareness. This is true at any age.

Finally, I leave the most important thing for last. The transition from a position of self-affirming autonomy to dependence requires a deep change, a great conversion. This is impossible without a great **grace**. Therefore, I urge you to always be patient, with others and with yourself.

Things will fall apart. When they do, forgive, ask for **forgiveness**, and ask for the grace for you and for those who live with you.

Living together in close quarters is very intense. Suddenly, what was hidden comes out roaring like a lion. Keep always in mind the need to reconcile, to forgive and to ask for forgiveness every day, as often as it is necessary. Say the words. "*Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry*" (Eph 4:26)

Giussani often repeated that the saint is not the person who never makes mistakes, but the person who reduces the amount of time between falling and asking for grace.
